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Understanding the relationship between Facebook use and adaptation to financial hardship: Evidence from a longitudinal panel study blinded for review

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ABSTRACT

Prior longitudinal studies on the effects of Facebook use on well-being often found no or only small effects. One reason could be that well-being indicators are often remarkably stable over time. In the present study, we looked therefore at people who experienced financial hardship, a stressful life event, and examined whether Facebook users differed from non-users in how they reacted and adapted to the life event over time and which role social support played in this process. We used multilevel models to examine the recovery process to the negative life event. Facebook users experienced a larger drop of satisfaction with their financial situation during the life event (= the reaction phase) than non-users, but showed higher levels of satisfaction after the life-event (= the adaptation phase). Online social support was also beneficial for adaptation to the life event. Next, we examined within the subsample of Facebook users to what extent frequency of posting and reading were related to receiving online social support and in turn financial satisfaction. Frequency of posting and reading were positively related to online social support. However, only posting was related to higher financial satisfaction and only at the end of the adaptation phase, indicating that Facebook use might mainly contribute positively to people's well-being some while after stressful life-events.

1. Introduction

Facebook use has become part of the daily routine for many people, and researchers have wondered how Facebook use affects life-satisfaction or other indicators of well-being. A recent review (Verduyn, Ybarra, Résibois, Jonides, & Kross, 2017) showed that active Facebook use, i.e. posting status updates and writing messages, is good for well-being, mainly because people build social capital from which they can receive social support. Passively browsing the mainly positive updates of others, in contrast, negatively affects well-being because the resulting social comparisons trigger envy. The majority of studies has however been cross-sectional or used student samples (Verduyn et al., 2017). Longitudinal analyses found a less clear picture. Effects occurred either only for one of the well-being indicators (Dienlin, Masur, & Trepte, 2017), the reverse paths were also significant (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014), or effects occurred only for very specific forms of communication (e.g., targeted communication with strong ties; Burke & Kraut, 2016). Most longitudinal studies contained only two waves (Dienlin et al., 2017; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014) or did not analyze the

temporal patterns (three waves, Burke & Kraut, 2016; four waves, Trepte, Dienlin, & Reinecke, 2015), making it difficult to detect non-linear trajectories.

A recent study by Utz & Breuer (2017) analyzed six waves of a panel study with a representative sample of Dutch internet users and found that Facebook users reported higher levels of online social support, but also higher levels of stress. Users and non-users did not differ in life satisfaction. Detailed cross-lagged panel analyses within the group of users showed that Facebook use, more specifically, asking for advice, and receiving social support online were positively related within as well as across waves. Higher levels of online social support, however, did not result in a decrease of stress or an increase of life satisfaction in subsequent waves (see also Trepte et al., 2015). Instead, stress and online social support were positively correlated within waves. This could indicate that a third variable, such as a stressful life event, drives both, higher levels of stress and higher online social support.

To explore this puzzling finding further, we focus in the present paper only on people who experienced a stressful life event. We chose the experience of financial hardship for pragmatic and content-related

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reasons. The pragmatic reason is that experiencing financial hardship was one of the most frequently encountered life events in our sample, ensuring a larger subsample and thus higher power. Content-wise, in contrast to more ambiguous life events that might be positive for some people (e.g. moving, relationship break), financial hardship is clearly negative; and it has been shown that it is related to depression (Butterworth, Rodgers, & Windsor, 2009).

The goal of the present paper is to examine the role of Facebook use in recovering from life events such as financial hardship. It examines whether Facebook users and non-users differ in how experiencing financial hardship affects their satisfaction with financial aspects of their life before, during and after the life event. We zoom in into the role of online social support in recovering from experiencing financial hardship. Finally, we examine within the subsample of Facebook users the role of active and passive Facebook use (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011). Our work not only sheds more light on the role Facebook use can play for well-being, but it also contributes to research on adaptation to life events. Recent work has shown that different people react differently to life events, but this work has so far focused on personality characteristics (Hirsch, Wolford, LaLonde, Brunk, & Morris, 2007; Yap, Anusic, & Lucas, 2012) and neglected the role of media use.

1.1. Theoretical background

Research on subjective well-being, i.e., how people feel and think about their lives, distinguished between an affective and a cognitive component (Diener, 1984). Whereas affective well-being refers to the presence/absence of pleasant/unpleasant affect, cognitive well-being refers to the cognitive evaluation of life. The cognitive evaluation, i.e. the judgment of outcomes as fulfilling expectations, can be measured on a global level, but also for certain domains such as career satisfaction (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). A recent meta-analysis on the effects of various life events on well-being has shown that effects are usually larger on cognitive well-being (Luhmann et al., 2012). The present paper therefore focuses on cognitive well-being, more specifically, satisfaction with one's financial situation (or shorter: financial satisfaction).

1.2. Adaptation to life events and life satisfaction: the set-point model

Research on the effect of life events on well-being has long been dominated by the assumption that people can and do adapt to life events (for an overview, see Lucas, 2007). The term hedonic treadmill has been coined by Brickmann and Campbell (1971) to describe the fact that people temporarily react on life events, but that they adapt soon back to their personal set-point of life satisfaction. Due to this quick adaptation and habituation to new circumstances, life satisfaction often seems remarkably stable in longitudinal studies. This view has been challenged, as the review by Diener, Lucas, and Scollon (2006) shows. It has for example been shown that people have individual set-points, also influenced by personality, and that they have multiple set-points for different domains, e.g. life in general vs. work. More important, people differ in their ability to recover from negative life events. Studies using panel data, following a large number of people over a long time, have for example found that not everybody recovers from widowhood (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003).

In longitudinal panel studies taking a process perspective, life satisfaction before the life event is usually treated as baseline and compared with life satisfaction during the life event (the reaction phase) and life satisfaction in the years after the life event (the adaptation phase). The variance in trajectories is then studied. Groups of people could differ for example in the size of the drop in life satisfaction in the reaction phase or in whether their life satisfaction recovers until the baseline level of stays at a lower level in the adaptation phase. Differences in adaptation patterns have usually been explained with interindividual differences in coping strategies or personality

characteristics (Diener et al., 2006; Hirsch et al., 2007). The effects of media use have been neglected in this research tradition, and social media research on the other hand also has not paid much attention to the role of life events when studying the effects of social media use on well-being (see below for exceptions). The present paper is going to bring these two lines of research together.

1.3. Facebook use and adaptation to life events

To our knowledge, there are no studies using longitudinal panel data to examine the effect of Facebook use on the trajectories of adaptation to life events. There is work on internet use for coping with life events; Van Ingen, Utz, and Toepoel (2016) compared offline and online forms of coping and assessed also the use of social network sites as one form of online coping. They found that social network sites are used in several ways: for mental disengagement (e.g., distraction by looking at profiles of friends, watching funny content in the news feed), but also for problem-focused and socio-emotional coping. Interestingly, all three forms of online coping were negatively related to life satisfaction, although equivalent form of offline coping showed positive relationships with life satisfaction.

Bevan et al. (2015) examined how life events were shared on Facebook and found that negative events were more likely to be shared directly whereas positive events were often shared indirectly via photos. They did however not assess life satisfaction. The study that is most relevant for our paper, is the work by Burke and Kraut (2013) on Facebook use after job loss. They had three waves of panel data and could access log data to measure actual Facebook use. Burke and Kraut (2013) did not find changes in actual Facebook use, but directed communication with stronger ties led to an increase in social support, a decrease in stress in the long term and a higher chance of finding a new job. In contrast, passive reading of posts was associated with a decrease in social support. In a similar vein, Zhang (2017) found in a cross-sectional study that self-disclosure about stressful life events moderated the effect of stressful life events on satisfaction with life; people who disclosed more were less affected by stressors. Self-disclosure was also related to online social support; when including both predictors, the effect of self-disclosure was no longer significant and only online social support mattered. Thus, there are some first hints that Facebook use, especially active use, might be beneficial for the adaptation to life events.

Although there is not much work on Facebook use after life events, there are many studies on the effects of Facebook use on well-being in general (see Verduyn et al., 2017, for a review). Positive and negative effects have been found, and in a similar vein, positive and negative effects of Facebook use on adaptation to life events are possible. With regard to positive effects, Facebook users might adapt better to life events because they receive more social support from the social capital they maintain and build by using Facebook (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). There are two theoretical models how social support can affect adaptation to life events, which both have received empirical support: the buffer model and the direct effect model (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Holt-Lunstadt & Uchino, 2015).

According to the buffer model (Cohen & McKay, 1984), social support functions as a buffer; the drop in life satisfaction in the reaction phase during a stressful life event should thus be lower for people with a high level of social support. According to the direct effect model (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Pocnet et al., 2016), people with higher levels of social support experience also a drop in life satisfaction during the reaction phase, but recover more quickly and to a larger degree in the adaptation phase due to the social support they receive afterwards – either because they had higher levels of social support at the baseline or because they are more successful in leveraging their social capital, for example by asking their online friends for social support. Nabi, Prestin, and So (2013) found a stronger relationship between the number of

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